

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL THOMAS MCGRATH, U.S. ARMY, COMMANDER, REGIONAL SECURITY INTEGRATION COMMAND-SOUTH, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN TIME: 9:30 A.M. EDT DATE: TUESDAY, MAY 6, 2008

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): All right, sir. Well, we kind of have --

COL. MCGRATH: Start when you're ready, and we can start talking as of -- (off mike).

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

COL. MCGRATH: How's that?

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir. We've got you loud and clear. I'll tell you what. Why don't -- we've got -- pretty much got a quorum right now. So we can go ahead and get started, and as the others join us, we can add them, bring them up to speed as they come on line here, sir. So -- COL. MCGRATH: Okay. Wonderful.

Hey, everybody. Good morning. My name's Colonel Tom McGrath. I'm the commander for the Afghan Regional Security Integration Command here in Kandahar, which is in southern Afghanistan. And I have some pretty good information I want to share with you today.

I think one of the first areas I want to cover is the deployment of the 2-7 Marine Infantry -- are expected to be with us for the next seven months, working on the police mentor mission. The Marines, they got a pretty good mission here, pretty unique, in that for the first time, they're going to take part in the police mentor training that many of our soldiers, sailors and airmen have been doing for the last 12 months.

What we're going to have them do is what we call in-district reform, which allows the Marines to move into Taliban-controlled areas and begin the crucial work of, you know, training the Afghan National Police as uniformed officers over a period of eight weeks. That's the training period, eight weeks.

What's important to note about the mission is that not only are they going to be training -- (off mike) -- in areas that are considered hot spots or places we haven't had many coalition in the past, but they're also taking on the role of mentors. And this battalion brings along a lot of history with it. Also, they had the police mission in Iraq and served as police trainers, so they bring a lot of experience in the kinetic and also the non-kinetic parts of the

fight. And I think it's quite obvious the Marines are here to do the right thing, build a better police force, which in turn will help build a better government and security for the people of Afghanistan.

As to the Afghan National Uniformed Police, the AUP, I can't say enough about their progress in the last five months.

We see many great successes now that the first wave of the AUP have been working in their respective districts, post focused district development. Let me explain a little bit about that, what that is.

FDD, or focused district development, is a program where we create a more standardized, practical uniformed police force that supports the rule of law, strengthens the bond of government and provides a safe and secure environment for Afghanistan.

The bottom line is, what we do is, we go into a district and we remove the police force. And most of these policemen are untrained, and I mean untrained, poorly equipped, no uniforms. We take them off to a centralized training area and we train them for a period of eight weeks.

During that period, we backfill them with the Afghan national civil order police, which is a highly trained national police force that they have. And then when that's complete, we rip them back in and move the ANCP into another area. And it's worked quite well.

At the end of March, we had our first group, out of Zabul province to the east, in three different districts, move back in. And they've done extremely well. The high point is that you have a very professional police force that is making its way through the villages and the towns and the bazaars.

But also they're engaging Taliban. We've killed approximately 60 to 70 Taliban in the last couple of weeks. And that's a first, for the Taliban, that they're getting killed by the ANAP.

And it's also a first for the people of that area, because they're seeing Afghan national police stepping up very proudly doing their job. They're well-trained, well-equipped, in uniform, doing the right thing, supporting the people.

So this is a very, very positive step in the right direction. And we just graduated another couple of hundred that we placed in the very volatile district of Panjwayi, which is just west of Kandahar. And we just put them in, in the last 10 days, and we haven't had any contacts out there either in that area.

So I think they're very good, very professional, an incredible change from what we have experienced before. But it's -- you know, it's community-based policing. They're out there meeting the people, meeting the district governors and things of that nature, and they're giving the people a much better sense of support.

They're also patrolling regularly. We've changed their habits. They used to like to sit around on checkpoints along the roads, doing nothing or shaking down the population. Now we have (them ?) patrolling in the street, patrolling along the major highways and also in the countryside, where they're able to disrupt and interdict Taliban operations.

The Taliban, through our intelligence, are confused, because they're getting hit by the ANP. Their morale's down, and they're having trouble gathering up momentum to get things moving.

It is the poppy season, though. We're waiting for the poppy season to end. So you know, we'll see what happens after that. But I think it's a great step forward. It's improving the security of the local people and building their confidence in the government of Afghanistan, and we're really excited about it.

We're taking a lot of risks down here in southern Afghanistan, in Kandahar. Other districts -- other places are doing just a couple of districts. We're doing more. We've got to keep this big train moving. You've got to be decisive and take risks to win wars, and that's what we want to do down here.

To date, I've graduated just under 700 AUP from FDD program, and I have another couple hundred in training now. And then we're going to immediately go into future iterations of the FDD program throughout the rest of the summer and into the winter.

So another good -- to change the subject -- is that we're issuing M-16s to the Afghan National Army. The M-16, along with -- the Canadians have issued their version of the M-16, which is the C-7. It's a new program to modernize their small arms. Current weapons fielded -- you know, the AK-47 fielded by the Afghans is, you know, an old weapon. However, the current M-16 is much better, much stronger, better -- forces the Afghans to take aimed shots, conserve ammunition. It's easier -- it's much better for maintenance and things of that nature. So we -- right now we've fielded about 1,400 of the weapons to the 205th Corps. It's an issue of pride and prestige to them that they have the M-16. I see the way they carry it, just kind of a swagger that they have. You know, they want the Americans and the Canadians have. So this is a real good step forward.

And we're going to continue to modernize the Afghan National Army and the police in the upcoming -- upcoming -- upcoming months. Excuse me. And I think it gives them a significant tactical advantage over the insurgents, and I think it's going to pay off for us. As our stuff gets better, the Afghan -- the Taliban seem to be remaining in the same rut that they've been in for the last six or seven months down here. We haven't seen any improvements in their fighting capabilities or the ability to organize. So I'm very excited about that. We're also going to field some humvees to them, other NATO weapons, crew-serve weapons and things of that nature. And we're going to make sure they have -- ANA has an effective field artillery also, as we're fielding some of their weapons and some of ours.

We're also growing a strong, capable NCO cadre. We've got a long way to go. This part of the world really doesn't use NCOs like the United States, Canadians or Brits do. They're the backbone of any army. And what we're doing is we've promoted over about 1,400 in the last seven months and sent them through some pretty good courses, team-leader courses and squad-leader courses that are pretty rigorous, and trying to get them to understand the role of the noncommissioned officer and the importance of that role.

205th Corps, which is hear in Kandahar, is making great strides in their ability to plan and execute tactical operations independent of the coalition. We're building a TOC for them, a tactical operations center, which,

you know, further enhances their capability to see to the battle and allow them better situational awareness, and also directly support their troops in combat.

So we're seeing a lot of leaps and bounds. It's slow, there's no doubt about it. Change takes time. But if you look -- I've been here about a year, and I got a few more months to go. I look back and I see a lot of progress that's coming along, and I see us picking things up in the next couple of months.

So as you can see, we got a lot of new things going on, lot of new aspects, the whole picture, rebuilding the Afghan national security forces, and I think we've had a lot of great achievements.

And that's my opening statement.

If you have any questions, please go right ahead.

MR. HOLT: All right. Okay, sir. Thank you very much.

Christopher, you were first on line. Why don't you get us started?

Q Good morning, sir. Can you give us an update on the Marines -- I guess it's the 24th MEU out in Helmand, what they're doing and how their deployment is going so far?

COL. MCGRATH: Well, I can give you what I hear. They don't work for me like 2-7 does, but it's going extremely well. They've attacked into the southern part of Helmand. They met some opposition. The enemy seem to lay down their arms and leave. But they've been making great progress across that area to disrupt and interdict enemy operations.

You know, southern Helmand, the bad guys make their way up through Pakistan into the sanctuaries in the northern part of the area. Nobody's been down there recently in any size. There's been some picket-type operations, if you will, but with the Marines going in there full force, I think it's one heck of a surprise to the Taliban and is going to disrupt their operations for the near future, to say the least.

So I -- overall, I say it's going great. Good force, good bunch of Marines out there doing some tough work in that part of the country.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Andrew?

Q Colonel, Andrew Lubin from Military Observer. I appreciate you taking the time. Sir, you just gave us an update on 24 MEU. Can you give us a bit of an overview on also your guys, also the Brits and Canadians? What overall is happening in Kandahar in the south? You know, who's got what missions?

COL. MCGRATH: Okay. We have RC South -- Regional Command South is commanded by Major General Marc Lessard, a Canadian two-star general. (Coughs.) Excuse me. He's got his staff, a lot of Canadians integrated into the staff, whereas we had the Brits a few months ago and they've changed out. They'll be here till late fall. Kandahar, 1st Brigade -- Task Force Kandahar is in the Kandahar province. They have Zari, Panjwai, Kandahar City in the northern part.

The Canadians have done extremely well in those areas. They're short on troops. We all know that they've demanded more troops to be committed to the region, and -- but with a limited number of forces there in -- where I'm doing one of my focused district developments, they devised a very good plan in constricting the enemy and its movement. And then they've also gone to the non-kinetic side, where they're paving a lot of roads and bringing a lot of jobs to the local populace. And they continue in their patrolling and framework operations, if you will, in the northern part.

I think they've been very successful. They're also mentoring the 1st Brigade of the 205th Corps, led by a Colonel Francois Riffou. He's done -- him and his guys have done an exceptional job in bringing the different kandaks or battalions online and bringing them up to a readiness level. We expect one battalion to hit a CM level 1, which is pretty much capable of independent operations, here shortly. And frankly, the guy -- one of the kandak commanders down there has conducted, I'd say, four independent battalion operations over the last month.

He's done extremely well and he's planned it. He's organized it; he's rehearsed it all by himself.

The OMLTs go out. They bring in the enablers, the CAS and MEDEVAC and stuff like that. But he's executed on himself.

So I'm real happy with the Canadian performance. They've been -- they've done exceptionally well. They have a great bunch of soldiers, very brave; tough, tough area that they're working in.

The Brits are over in Helmand. That's a very, very dynamic, volatile area. They're spread throughout Southern Helmand all the way up to the Upper Sangin Valley. They're conducting their framework operations.

That area is a little bit different because it's more of a populated area with more cover and concealment, believe it or not. It's not all desert here.

As you follow rivers, we have what we call -- we call it the green zone, not to be confused with the Iraq Green Zone, but literally trees and bushes and orchards and things like that, where the enemy has a better place of hiding.

And what the Brits are doing in that area, because there's a lot of population -- it's a very populated area. And following COIN doctrine, you want to separate the bad guy, you know, the fish from the sea, so the bad guy from the population. So they're conducting those security operations out there.

I think with the Marines going down south and doing what they're doing, interdicting and disrupting the Taliban operations, it's going to relieve a lot of pressure on the operations that are going on in Central and Northern Helmand province.

And we also have the Dutch up in Oruzgan and doing well up there. They're assisting us in our police training. I'm not going to say it's quiet up there. But it's poppy season up there, so we've got a lot of the bad guys who are doing their thing with harvesting the poppy and things like that. So we may see things heating up there.

But we're establishing better -- more police, a better trained army, in each of the four provinces that we work in down here. And I think we're going to be able to disrupt what they're planning to do, not allow them to organize. You push them back six months. Then they're into the winter, and you can do nothing in the winter down here. It's brutal winters. So I see us making good progress across the region.

Q Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Megan.

Q Yeah.

Here in the United States, we hear a lot about the Taliban spring offensive. Can you just give us an update of what type of resistance you're experiencing from the Taliban right now?

COL. MCGRATH: You know, I keep hearing about it also and I haven't seen it yet. We keep hearing about that they're going to pick up and attack. And so we're waiting around.

Well, I shouldn't say we're waiting around. We are ready and we've actually, I think, pre-empted it with several disrupts and interdiction operations throughout the region, with 24th MEU. And the 2nd of the 506 also went on a disrupt/interdiction operation on the east.

And we see them pretty much drop their weapons, move out or (get ?) themselves interspersed with the local yokels there.

I keep hearing also that, hey, everything's going to explode as soon as poppy season's over. So we're staying by -- you know, we're continuing aggressive operations against them. But you know, it's kind of late spring right now. Summer will be here in a -- (audio break) -- it's hot as heck down here already. I think it's summer. (Chuckles.) Summer hits, what --

Q June.

COL. MCGRATH: -- 20 June. So I'm waiting. You'll see it -- I think we've hurt them. I think they're disorganized. But I don't want to count my chickens yet. But I think they're having some problems.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And I had a few other folks join us on line. Who else is with us?

Q This is David.

MR. HOLT: Okay, David. Go ahead.

Q Hi. This is David Axe with War Is Boring. Thanks for taking the time to talk to us.

So as regards the Dutch in Oruzgan, have you seen -- I was with them last year and saw that they -- (this was ?) operating like -- sort of like U.S. forces were in Iraq in 2005, sort of consolidated at a major base, with -- not

doing a lot of aggressive patrolling and certainly not, you know, dispersing into combat outposts. Have you seen them shift their tactics to more COIN-appropriate methods?

COL. MCGRATH: Yes. They've done major operations in several of the valleys throughout Oruzgan. They're also heavily engaged in assisting in, you know, the mentoring of the Afghan National Army too, and they're going on operations, and they're definitely not hunkered down at Tarin Kot. We're in -- and actually, we're spreading operations in that area to several other patrol bases and forward operating bases that were -- that the Dutch have initiated and handed also over to the Australians. So I'm seeing them being pretty aggressive up there. They do do shorter tours than the rest of us, and that does cause a little bit of disruption. But they pick it up pretty fast. And I've been out with them on several occasions, and you know, they're doing the best they can up there. It's -- they're also -- the bad guys are laying low up there too. We're not seeing a lot of things going on. But I see them moving out, just like everybody else.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q Okay. Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Who else is with us?

Q Grim with Blackfive.net.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Grim. Go ahead.

Q Sir, I wanted to ask about the comments -- I hope I haven't -- the question hasn't been asked already, because I apologize for being late, but I wanted to ask about President Karzai's comments that were reported by The New York Times where he said that he wanted American forces to stop arresting suspected Taliban and their sympathizers, and the continued threat of arrest and past mistreatment, as The New York Times quoted him, were discouraging Taliban from coming forward to lay down their arms.

To what degree do you feel that that is a true critique? And are you talking it on board at all in your operations?

COL. MCGRATH: Well, you know, I heard it. I haven't put too much -- I haven't changed any of my operations down here based on that. I haven't received any direction to do that, Grim. So we're driving on as usual. I can't speculate what he means by that. I don't want to. I'll just leave it at that. Sorry, I don't have -- I just don't have enough on it. But I can say that we're pressing on and continuing our operations as on a normal basis.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Anyone else joined us?

Q Yeah. Greg Grant here.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Greg.

Q Colonel, there's a report in the Wall Street Journal today about how -- quoting some military official saying Iran has been training Taliban.

And I was just curious if you're seeing that in your area and if you're getting wind of that as well.

COL. MCGRATH: No, I haven't seen it in the area at all. Haven't heard any rumors or intel. If they're training them, they're not doing very well. You know, the -- like I said, they've been laying low for a while now. I'm not sure if it's just the poppy harvest or stuff like that, but, you know, as I answered the earlier question, we're waiting for them to stand up. We're also going after them, but I haven't seen any Iranian weapons or anything of that nature making its way -- making its way here into Kandahar.

Q Do you think that's a credible argument, that Iran would be training what is largely a Pashtun-based tribal insurgency?

COL. MCGRATH: Well, you know, you -- you know -- I don't know. They're always up to something, put it that way. I'd have to, you know, look into that. I know we had issues with them in Iraq, but I haven't really seen any incidence of that here. Most of these guys, they're coming up from Pakistan, and some of them are local types. But, you know, haven't captured anybody or anything like that. I haven't seen any incidence of IEDs, of, you know, the EFP or anything like that in the region. So I have no reason to believe they're here at this point, but -- .

Q What's the -- I'm sorry, go ahead.

MR. HOLT: All right. Someone -- was there one other on?

Q Yeah. Jack, Dave Dilegge, Small Wars Journal.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Dave.

Q Yeah. I'm sorry about coming in late, and thanks a lot for joining us.

You referenced our COIN doctrine a little earlier.

Based on your experience now in Afghanistan, what's your take on 3-24?

COL. MCGRATH: Oh, I think it's great. I've read -- I think it's spot on. I've read Galula's books, "Pacification in Algeria," I've read -- good Lord, all the classics on counterinsurgency, and it seems to reflect that very clearly. It's doctrine, but it's also going to be used as what we call a cook book, where, you know, there's things that you can follow in there on the intelligence, on the way that you address kinetic and non-kinetic operations.

I think it's a well-written manual. It's coming from some of the experts, guys who are working here and Iraq, also. So I think it's pretty good. I've got it. You know, it's dog-eared. I've gone through it. And very happy with it. I think it's a good manual, very easy to read and follow.

Q And related, any insights on the COIN academy up in Kabul? Have you used that at all, or your people?

COL. MCGRATH: I have not attended the COIN academy, but my people have attended on a regular basis. We have taskings and we send folks up there to teach and attend. And we also send Afghans to it. Just the just other day we brought some COIN academy instructors down here on an operation with the



Canadians, and the Canadians said, hey, talk to the Afghans about lessons learned and things like that. So they held an impromptu AAR/class with the Afghans, and it went extremely well.

You know, COIN, I think our soldiers and other soldiers at -- professional armies can understand COIN really without a problem. It just has to be properly introduced in the curriculum at the different schools and things like that. I haven't been home in a year or so, so I'm not sure if it's in the different CGSCs, et cetera. But I'm sure it is. I'm seeing a lot of the captains and majors coming over with a real god handle on counterinsurgency, and also the guys we send up to the academy go up there with a wealth of knowledge from working in the field and they're able to present their lessons learned and observations to the new guys coming in.

So I think it's the right way to go. You constantly need to improve on yourself, update TTPs, update methods of doing things, and I think this is, you know, the proper way of doing it.

MR. HOLT: All right. We've got a few minutes left here. Any other follow-ups? Q Yeah. Greg Grant again. Colonel, I'd be curious to hear your opinion on this discussion that's going on in Washington about U.S. taking over command of RC South, and just what you think would be the benefits to operations down there, particularly for any American units in the region, and whether you think overall that would be a smart move.

COL. MCGRATH: I think it would be -- personal opinion -- I think it would be a good move, allows for a little better unity of command vice unity of effort.

It brings a lot more troops into the region also, which I think is good.

So counterinsurgency is -- requires troops. If you go back to the Algerian model, they sealed the borders with hundreds of thousands of troops and then were able to, you know, run their operations inside of that, which was very successful. I think it's a positive step forward, gives us -- you know, we're on the ground for longer periods of time, 12, 15 months or whatever, there. I think that works. I think it'll have a very good effect on things.

I'm not sure exactly what they're discussing as timetables and things like that, but I think it's a good way forward, personally speaking.

Q How many --

COL. MCGRATH: (Inaudible) -- else, but I think it allows us a lot more freedom of maneuver across the region, as a team, as opposed to being contained to one province or so at a time.

Q How many additional brigades do you think would be needed in the next, say, year or so to stabilize that?

COL. MCGRATH: Oh, boy. Boy, you're asking a big one there. As many -- (chuckles) -- as many as they want to send is fine with me.

Q (Chuckles.)

COL. MCGRATH: I'm a firm believer in principles of war (en masse ?) --

Q Gotcha.

COL. MCGRATH: -- and the more, the better.

But I'm not sure what they're talking about. I have to apologize. They haven't got into the guts of what they're saying. So you know, a couple brigades would be super, but you know -- 10(,000), 12,000 troops. We'll see. But I can't really answer that as an expert, because I'm not sure exactly the details that they're going into in the discussions.

Q Thank you. MR. HOLT: Okay.

Any others? We've just got a couple seconds left.

Q Yeah. What do you see as the -- how should we look at success in your area? How do -- look -- if we look back at the end of 2008, what should we be looking at as how -- whether this year has been a successful year or a difficult year?

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah. I think you need to look at the police force, that you're going to see a much more professional police force, better-trained, better-equipped, (proper ?) manning, men who are getting paid, across the region. The police force is the first line of defense in a counterinsurgency. They bring security to the people. I think that's a good metric to use.

And we are moving out and getting police trained and doing quite well, I think. I think also you look at the capabilities of the Afghan national army as they conduct more independent operations.

MR. HOLT: Okay, and I think we're just about out of time here.

I'd like to thank Colonel McGrath for joining us here for the Bloggers Roundtable. Colonel Thomas J. McGrath, the commander of the Afghan Regional Security Integration Command-South, out of Kandahar, Afghanistan. Thank you very much sir.

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